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ABSTRACT

Cooperative extension service faculty at New Mexico State University started the Steps to Employment and Personal Success (STEPS) program to help Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) clients qualify for and maintain full-time employment and strengthen their families for long-term success. Clients are referred to STEPS by New Mexico Works. Approximately 65% of STEPS' clients are Hispanic, and 41% lack a high school diploma or its equivalent. STEPS' goals include improving participants' awareness and knowledge of requirements of the evolving workplace and helping them develop and/or improve their job search skills. Participants also receive training in family management skills, including setting financial goals, budgeting, cutting costs, using credit wisely, reducing debt, and saving and investing. To strengthen families, STEPS includes nutrition education and parenting classes. Through the program, participants also develop a network of social support that links families to community resources. STEPS features a rolling admittance policy and provides several experiential learning activities, including family outings for participants' children and field trips to the local community college. Classes meet 7 hours per day. Since July 1, 2001, 323 TANF recipients have been referred to STEPS. Many former STEPS participants credit the program with giving them direction in their lives, and 24% of them have subsequently enrolled in some type of further education. (MN)

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STEPS: Moving from Welfare to Work

Balancing work and family is difficult for most people. But if you're low on resources and short on skills, the stress of raising children while holding down a job can be overwhelming.

That's why Cooperative Extension Service faculty at New Mexico State University started the Steps to Employment and Personal Success (STEPS) program. STEPS provides life skills training for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) clients to help them qualify for and sustain full-time employment as well as to strengthen their families for long-term success.

Clients are referred to STEPS by New Mexico Works, welfare-to-work transition program of the Extension Service, which mainly serves single-parent families (63 percent) in the Las Cruces urban area. About 65 percent of the audience is Hispanic, and many of the participants (41 percent) lack a high school diploma or GED.

Goals of the program include improving participant awareness and knowledge of the requirements of the evolving work place and helping them develop or improve their job search skills. Participants learn resume building, cover letter preparation and interviewing techniques. At the same time, they learn family management skills in setting financial goals, budgeting, cutting costs, using credit wisely, reducing debt, saving for the future and investing in retirement.

To strengthen families, training addresses nutrition education, including healthy eating, nutrition on a budget and food preparation. Parenting classes strengthen parent-child bonding and promote family communication through literacy, play, music and family activities. In addition, the importance of having fathers involved with their children is stressed.

Through the program, participants also develop a network of support that links families to community resources. By the time they graduate from the program, they often state that they have increased their self-esteem. They are eager to look for and obtain employment in order to become self-sufficient and provide for their families. Many of the participants credit the program for giving them direction in their lives and the desire to seek further education.

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STEPS: Moving from Welfare to Work

With the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, New Mexico was faced with finding ways to move welfare recipients into the workplace. Many social and economic factors unique to New Mexico have made this a challenging process.

New Mexico is 48th in per capita income with unemployment ranging from 1.9% to 22.8%, depending on the county. Twenty-nine percent of New Mexico children live in poverty, and 32% live in single-parent families. New Mexico has consistently been designated as the worst state in which to raise children.

Since July 1998, the College of Agriculture and Home Economics and the Cooperative Extension Service at New Mexico State University have assisted people in southern New Mexico with the transition from welfare to work through the New Mexico Works program. New Mexico Works provides welfare recipients in nine counties with training, education, job development, and job placement.

The goals of New Mexico Works include developing participants' self-reliance and responsibility, enhancing participants' employability skills through education and training, providing opportunities for work experiences and on-the-job training, and ending family dependence on public benefits through job placement.

In addition to receiving job training and placement, New Mexico Works participants build a variety of skills that will help keep them employed. New Mexico Works arranges for alcohol and drug treatment programs, services for victims of domestic violence, community service opportunities, child care, and public transportation to activities. Participants take classes in parenting, managing money, securing permanent housing, improving language skills, earning GED certification, and developing life skills.

The life skills program, Steps to Employment and Personal Success (STEPS), is delivered by the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences and the Department of Extension Home Economics at NMSU. The STEPS program was supported by a $250,000 grant in year one and a $160,000 grant in year two from New Mexico Works. Funding was provided for salaries, curriculum development, instructional materials and supplies, small equipment and furniture, and student incentives.

The STEPS development team was selected based on areas of expertise and research and teaching interests related to serving at-risk audiences. The team is comprised of four faculty members—one department head, one professor in Family and Consumer Sciences Education, one associate professor in Family and Child Science, and one assistant professor in Extension Family Resource Management.

Teachers, work-study students, and graduate students are employed in the STEPS program. Staffing patterns depend on the time of year, the number of the participants, and the

number of undergraduate and graduate students involved in teaching, internships, and/or research activities. Typical class sizes have averaged eight participants.

The mission of the STEPS program is to conduct life skills education for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) participants to assist them in sustaining full-time employment and strengthening family functioning.

The goals of the STEPS program are for participants to:

- Increase knowledge of the requirements of an evolving workplace.
- Develop or improve job search skills.
- Apply positive behaviors, attitudes, and practices necessary for long-term employment.
- Balance work, family, and community commitments.

The life skills curriculum, compiled by the authors, focuses on personal development, job search skills, communications, safety, resource management, and balancing work and family. Lesson plans for Life Skills were derived from research-based curricula used in a variety of programs from around the United States. A conceptual framework for the life skills program was developed from a review of literature, an evaluation of available life skills curricula, and consultation with case managers at New Mexico Works. Eight broad concepts were identified. They are personal development; personal communication; job search; success on the job; safety issues; money and benefit matters; balancing work, family, and community commitments; and planning for the future. Each concept area was developed in depth, allocated an amount of time, and organized into a four-week block plan, which is the average amount of time a participant is referred to the program.

The Nurturing Parenting curriculum is research-based, available in English and Spanish, has pre- and post- test evaluations, and is normally taught in 24 sessions, of two and one-half hours each. In STEPS, one session is taught each afternoon for 20-24 days. The basic curriculum is for parents of children from birth to five years of age. Additional age-appropriate curricula are available to use with parents of older children. Topics include family communication, brain development, effective discipline strategies, nurturing parenting skills, parent/child roles and expectations, self-esteem, physical and emotional development, parent/child activities, and child safety. These classes contribute to the development of interpersonal, communication, and problem-solving skills of the participants for both work and family situations.

Ideas for Cooking and Nutrition (ICAN), the food stamp education program of the New Mexico Cooperative Extension Service, provides hands-on education in the areas of healthy food choices, food preparation, safety, and resource management. Topics covered include food labels, the food guide pyramid, menu planning, comparative shopping, food safety, and feeding your children. Classes are taught by nutrition educators from the local Cooperative Extension office.

The STEPS participants are men or women referred to the program by New Mexico Works and currently receiving TANF benefits. Since July 1, 2001, there have been 323 referrals. The participants have ranged in age from 17 to 57 years of age, and 88 percent of the participants

have been female. Of the participants, 68% have been Hispanic, and 62% have been single parents. Only 46% of the participants have completed high school/GED compared to 75% of the New Mexico population 25 years of age and over. Twenty-four percent of the former participants have gone on to some type of further education after attending f STEPS.

STEPS is located in the College of Agriculture and Home Economics complex on the campus of New Mexico State University. The college campus location is a challenge to the participants when they first begin STEPS. However, the friendly atmosphere of the College of Agriculture and Home Economics reduces the anxiety of the participants who are included in the activities and celebrations of the departments and the College. The comfort level and successes experienced in this educational setting motivate many of the participants to further their education when they leave STEPS.

The STEPS program has a rolling admittance policy that allows participants to enter at any time. Classes are held seven hours per day including a study hour every afternoon for completing job applications, composing resumes and cover letters, completing homework, participating in service learning projects, and searching for jobs. A time clock is utilized to develop good work habits, a professional environment, and to provide an accurate record of participant attendance.

When participants begin STEPS, they are given a notebook that contains the program rules and ten index tabs. Throughout the class, participants develop this notebook into a resource by inserting handouts and the results of class activities and exercises. Upon graduation, they are presented with their notebooks.

Incentives are used for motivation and increasing self-esteem. Participants earn points every day for class attendance, participation, and other good work habits. At the end of each week, points are totaled, and those participants earning at least 75% of the total points available select items from the Country Store. The Country Store includes items they might not normally purchase. In addition, perfect attendance certificates are given every Friday.

Participants are involved in several experiential learning activities. Family outings, which involve the participants' children, have been taken to the public library, swimming pool, and the park. These outings allow the staff to interact with the participants and their children and model skills taught in the Nurturing Parenting classes. Field trips are taken each month to the campus personnel department where participants review employment opportunities and federally mandated safety postings. STEPS students have also attend a job fair at the Community College where they were able to apply some of the skills and information they had learned, as well as make valuable contacts. Field trips to the local community college expose participants to a variety of educational opportunities. While there, they can meet with a potential advisor, acquire financial aid information, enroll for placement testing, and/or complete career interest inventories.

Service learning is incorporated into the daily study hour. Participants create carryall bags to attach to the walkers of area nursing home residents. Field trips are taken to nursing homes where participants socialize with the residents and deliver the bags. Each month,

participants also complete a quilt square. At the end of each year, a quilt is made with these squares and delivered to the children's unit of the local hospital. Participants look forward to these activities and learn from this opportunity to give back to their community.

Graduation is held at the end of each month for participants completing at least 75% of all three curricula. Graduates invite family, friends, faculty, and staff. Many of the participants don caps and gowns for the first time in their lives for this ceremony.

The formal graduation ceremony includes a motivational speaker, presentations, and refreshments. Participants are presented with their resource notebooks and framed graduation certificates. The *ICAN* nutrition educator presents each graduate with a cookbook.

A benefactor provides high quality books for each of the graduates' children.

Support services are offered on a continuing basis to former STEPS participants. Computers, copy machines, fax machines, telephones, and Internet access are available for use. Staff members provide encouragement, conduct mock interviews, and assist in job search activities. When participants decide to further their education, STEPS personnel assist them in negotiating the financial aid maze, establishing their schedules, and locating their classrooms. Currently, 23 former STEPS participants attend a local community college. They have formed a close-knit group, providing support, child-care, and study assistance for each other.

STEPS was designed as a laboratory school for students in the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences at New Mexico State University and provides a "testing" ground for the skills of our graduate and undergraduate students. Faculty members build assignments into their course curricula that can be completed in the STEPS program.

Students enrolled in the Teaching in Informal Family and Consumer Sciences Settings course have used the STEPS program as their "live audience" for their community teaching presentations. Those preparing to be Family and Consumer Sciences teachers also practice their teaching skills and methods in STEPS. As they teach, students are videotaped and observed by the faculty. Self and peer critiques are completed by viewing the videotapes. The small size of the STEPS program has made this a very comfortable teaching setting for those in front of an audience for the first time.

Students taking other Family and Consumer Sciences courses, such as parenting and child guidance, infancy and early childhood, family resource management, family dynamics, interpersonal skills, clothing and human behavior, and human nutrition, find many opportunities to complete class projects in the STEPS program. Graduate and undergraduate students can conduct case study analyses, observations, and interviews with participants. In addition, students can assist the STEPS participants with professional correspondence, resume writing, and preparation for interviews. They can discuss problem solving related to finances, time management, and nutrition. University students are provided with contextual and project-based learning experiences and opportunities to learn from the STEPS participants.

Interns work with the STEPS staff in all aspects of the program. They gain experience in planning, implementing, adjusting, and evaluating community-based programs. Plans are underway for graduate students to complete Masters thesis research projects focused on various facets of the STEPS program including curriculum development and evaluation; implementation assessment; and participant satisfaction, growth, and success.

Of the 323 individuals assigned to STEPS, 67 participants have completed the entire program and graduated from STEPS. Sixty-two of the participants assigned went on to another placement at the discretion of their case managers. Case managers decide what experiences are most suitable for each client and may reassign them prior to the completion of STEPS. Participants might be placed in GED classes, volunteer work situations, or customized training programs. If they are close to the end of their five-year limit for cash assistance, they also might be sent on an intensive job search. Thirty-seven of the entering individuals obtained jobs prior to their graduation from STEPS and therefore did not complete the program. Only 20 of the referred individuals never appeared to begin the program. This number is lower than the national non-compliance rate of 38% for programs of this type.

Of the 323 participants, 63 are known to be pursuing additional education. Twenty-three of the participants have pursued further education at the local community college, while another 12 have attended a customized training for office specialist or certified nurses training. An additional 11 are attending business school and nine are enrolled in GED preparation classes. Five former participants are attending ESL classes, truck driving school, or the police academy, while three have returned to high school. Many are employed and are not pursuing additional education at this time.

The core expectation of the welfare-to-work program is to move families from welfare to self- sufficiency. The STEPS program was developed to facilitate this process. A mail survey is being developed and distributed to assess the success of the program. This study will assess the success of the program. The following multi-faceted purposes of this study will be addressed:

1. Determine personal life skill and job attainment changes of STEPS program participants.
2. Assess the satisfaction of STEPS program participants with the overall program and various program components.
3. Associate demographic variables with changes in life skills and job attainment of STEPS participants.

Based on these assessments, recommendations will be made to strengthen the STEPS curriculum and other program components for future participants.

STEPS has proven to be a successful program that makes a difference in people's lives when they are committed to moving from welfare to work. Based on participant feedback, two additional components of STEPS have been developed.

STEPS Reunion is designed for previous participant of STEPS, but is primarily for those who have obtained employment. STEPS Reunion participants will meet one night a week for one hour and 15 minutes. Each session will include a 30-minute lesson followed by a 15-minute break and a 30-minute discussion. Child care will be provided. During the break there will be refreshments and an opportunity for the children and parents to interact. Possible topics for presentations include: completing W-4 and I-9 forms, coping with job stress, getting along on the job, and practicing job ethics and etiquette.

Second STEPS is designed for previous participants of STEPS who are actively seeking employment. Second STEPS participants will meet five mornings a week for presentations, discussions, and individual assistance with the job search. During the afternoon, participants will make job contacts, deliver resumes and applications, and attend interviews.

STEPS is a pilot project that has received recognition as a model program in assisting participants to move from welfare to work. STEPS builds the individual's capacity to perform the work of the family and the work of the marketplace, resulting in stronger families and a decreased dependency of the family on society for financial assistance. The emphasis is on the development of a variety of life skills, which will enable the participants to become self-sufficient and employed.

STEPS: Steps to Employment and Personal Success

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Extension Home Economics and Family & Consumer Sciences Departments
New Mexico State University

STEPS (Steps to Employment and Personal Success) is part of New Mexico Works, a program to assist individuals move from welfare to work. **STEPS** is housed in the College of Agriculture and Home Economics at New Mexico State University and is supported by the Family and Consumer Sciences and Extension Home Economics Departments.

The Mission of **STEPS** is to provide meaningful learning experiences that lead to full-time employment and productive life styles. The goals are to enhance job search skills; improve knowledge about work skills; obtain long-term employment; improve ability to balance work, family and community commitments; manage resources; improve parenting skills; and obtain additional knowledge about nutrition.

The participants are individuals who are receiving TANF benefits and have been referred to the program by their case managers.

A conceptual framework was developed in consultation with the case managers. The curriculum was put together by Connie Kratzer and Merrilyn Cummings and is based on materials developed by Extension in New Mexico and across the land-grant system. Recognizing the importance of families to success on the job, the Nurturing Parenting curriculum is also taught. A four-week block plan was designed to cover the concepts. Classes meet from 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., Monday – Friday, with individual time for resume and letter writing, computer use and other skill development. A graduation ceremony is held at the end of each four-week session for the participants and their families. At this time, each of the children of the participants receives a new library quality book provided by a benefactor of the program.

STEPS began operation in July 2001 and in its first 17 months the total referrals were 323. Of these, 67 have completed the course and participated in graduation, 49 were employed prior to graduation, 63 have been reassigned and 20 were non-compliant. Twenty-three former **STEPS** participants are attending the local community college, 12 are attending customized training courses, 11 business school, 9 GED preparation classes, 5 are in miscellaneous training programs and 3 have returned to high school.

STEPS also serves as a lab school for the department. Over 60 undergraduates and graduate students are scheduled to do microteaching in the **STEPS** program as part of their academic work. Interns and graduate students are working in the program as well.

STEPS: Steps To Employment and Personal Success

WEEK 3	IV. Success on the Job →		V. Safety Issues →		
	A. Communication in the Workplace	B. Company Policies and Procedures C. Personal Qualities	A. At Home	B. In the Workplace	C. Nutrition and Food Safety
WEEK 4	VI. Money and Benefit Matters →			VII. Balancing Work, Family and Community Commitments	VIII. Planning for the Future
	A. Understanding Fringe Benefits B. Interpreting Earning Statements	Budgeting Your Income	C. Banking and Investing Your Income D. Using Credit	A. Family Responsibilities B. Work Responsibilities C. Community Involvement D. Personal Time	A. Creating a Vision for Self B. Setting Realistic Goals C. Planning for Upward Mobility D. Planning for Future Education and Career Training E. Using Networks F. Developing a Time Line for Future Goals

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STEPS: Steps To Employment and Personal Success

BLOCK PLAN FOR STEPS CURRICULUM

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
WEEK 1	I. Personal Development A. Self Understanding B. Basic Human Needs	→		→	II. Personal Communication A. Types B. Importance of Effective Communication C. Factors Impacting Communication D. Qualities of Effective Communication E. Personal Communication Assessment F. Handling Difficult Situations G. Interacting with Public and Other Agencies
		C. Self Esteem	D. Goals and Goal Setting E. Problem Solving Through Decision Making	F. Achieving Success G. Time Management	
WEEK 2	III. The Job Search → A. Possible Work/ Career Options and Choices B. Sources of Job Information			→	
		C. Matching Personal Skills and Background to Job Opportunities	D. Networking Procedures E. Developing a Personal Fact Sheet F. Filing System for Job Search Materials	G. Developing a Professional Career Portfolio H. Written Application Materials	I.Etiquette in the Job Search H. The Interview Process

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